

Custom House
Monterey, Monterey County
California

HABS No. CAL-133

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
Western Office, Division of Design and Construction
1000 Geary Street
San Francisco, California

PHOTOGRAPH-DATA BOOK REPORT
HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

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CUSTOM HOUSE

Monterey, Monterey County, California

ADDRESS: Alvarado Street at Scott Street
Monterey, California

OWNER: State of California
Division of Beaches and Parks

OCCUPANT: Division of Beaches and Parks

USE: Museum

HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

The Custom House historically illustrates, marks and combines the political, economic, and social conflicts under the Spanish, Mexican and American regimes, as no other California building does. Its construction carried through the three regimes.

HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The Custom House is California State Historical Monument No. I. It has been declared a historic site of "Exceptional Value" under Theme XV, Western Expansion and Extension of the National Boundaries, 1830-1898; and the subtheme, The Texas Revolution or Mexican War, under the National Survey of Historic Sites and Buildings conducted by the United States Department of Interior, National Park Service. The building has also been given "National Landmark" status.

The structure served as a Customs House under Spanish, Mexican and United States authority from 1814 until 1868 when it was finally deactivated and all customs operations were moved to San Francisco.

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Monterey was the principal Port of Entry in Northern California for foreign ships until major port activities moved to San Francisco with the discovery of gold in the Sierras. The control of customs revenue was a source of much political strife which exploded into armed revolt and over-throw of government during the Spanish and Mexican period.

The Presidio of Monterey was established in 1770, but it was not until the end of the first decade of the 19th century that New England trading ships began to arrive with any regularity. The Spanish Government then began to augment its revenues from duties on foreign goods with San Diego and Monterey made legal Ports of Entry. ¹

The Old Custom House at Monterey was constructed to its present configuration in three major stages under three regimes. The first Custom House was constructed after the death of Governor Joaquin Arrillaga in 1814 when Jose Dario Arguello became ad-interim Governor. It was a small, two-story almost square stone structure at the head of a rocky cove, which in the final structure became the north two-story element.

After Mexico secured its independence in 1822 and California became a part of that nation, Captain Luis Arguello, the son of Don Jose, was appointed the first Governor under the new regime. The increased activities of the port necessitated more space, which resulted in the addition of a large one-story room, 80 feet long, which formed the present central element and the veranda the full length of the east side. ²

By 1840 trade had increased to a point where additional space was needed; but, though Thomas O. Larkin prepared a bill of material and an estimate for alterations in 1841, ⁴ it appears that these alterations were not made until 1848, after the conquest by the United States. At this time alterations were made to the central element; and the south two-story element was constructed similar to the north two-story element. This resulted in the configuration of the building essentially as it is in its present restored condition. An adobe partition with the fireplace was constructed in the main room which reduced the room from 80 to 60 feet long. ²

With the discovery of gold in the Sierras, the Port of Monterey declined in importance as shipping activities shifted to San Francisco; and in 1868 the Custom House was deactivated. Ans so it had served in its official capacity as a Custom House under the flags of Spain, Mexico and the United States from 1814 until 1868 when Captain

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William G. Lambert was appointed as custodian of the property. He remodeled the south element, including the veranda, into living quarters and used the rest of the building to stable livestock until early 1890's, when the building became uninhabitable from deterioration. ²

In 1900 the Monterey Parlor of the Native Sons of the Golden West leased the building from the Federal Government and initiated restoration. The following year the lease was transferred by the Native Sons to the State of California and in 1903 funds were made available by the State Legislature for a modest restoration. Again, in 1917, additional funds were made available to complete the restoration started in 1903. During this period and until 1929 the building was used as lodge rooms by the Native Sons. In that year legislation was passed to establish the building as a public museum and on January 1, 1930 it was taken over by the Division of State Parks, Department of Natural Resources, and opened to the public.

Restoration work was done by the State Park Commission under the direction of Colonel Charles B. Wing, assisted by Myron Oliver, Charlton Fortune, Armin Hansen and Architect William O. Raiguel. The structure has been designated State Historical Monument No. I.

Political History

The first years of the existence of the Custom House were peaceful, but on November 20, 1818 Monterey was captured by the pirate Captain Hypolite Buchard and his squadron of Buenas Aires insurgents. ² During his stay the Presidio, church and other buildings were burned, but it is not of record that the Custom House suffered the same fate.

With the independence of Mexico in 1822, new maritime laws and regulations were put into effect and California was put on a self-supporting basis with import duties being the principal source of revenue to run the government. ⁷ This situation made the control of the customs a great political plum and resulted in political rivalry and turmoil.

In 1824 Lieutenant-Colonel Jose Maria Echeandia was appointed the new Governor to replace Governor Luis Arguello. Among his staff of officers was Don Jose Maria Herrera who had been appointed territorial treasurer in charge of the Monterey Custom House. Before many months he became involved with Governor Echeandia over financial affairs. Trumped-up charges of misuse of funds against Herrera could

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not be substantiated; ⁸ and when the convict Joaquin Soles headed an insurrection and was defeated, Herrera was again brought under jeopardy by charges of being a party to the mutiny. He was deported to Mexico with Soles for trial, but was acquitted and reappointed to his office several years later. ²

Serious trouble again developed in 1836 when a young clerk in the custom house, Jose Maria Costaneras, became involved in an illicit love affair with the wife of Don Jose Herrera which resulted in two Governors losing their posts before the scandal subsided. ¹⁰, ¹¹

The general unrest was capitalized upon by two of the members of the custom house staff, Angel Ramires, the director, and Juan Bautista Alvarado, the appraiser, who picked a quarrel with Governor Gutierrez and recruited the aid of Jose Castro at San Jose and the renegade American trapper Isaac Graham. With a force of some twenty-five other troopers, ship jumpers and plain riff-raff, they laid siege to the Presidio of Monterey and effected the surrender of Governor Gutierrez. The Governor and his officers were placed aboard the ship Clementine and unceremoniously exiled on the beaches at Cape San Lucas. ¹² Alvarado became Governor November 1836 and in turn was victim of an unsuccessful counter revolution by his former co-conspirator, Ramirez.

Again in 1841 controversy broke out between Governor Alvarado and his uncle, Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo, Commandant General, who wanted to remove the Custom House to San Francisco, which resulted in their removal from office by the Mexican Government. ¹³

A notable incident involving the United States occurred when Commodore Ap Catesby Jones and his squadron sailed into the harbor of Monterey and on October 20, 1842 seized the port in the name of the United States. He had a mistaken indication that hostilities had broken out between the United States and Mexico. Thomas O. Larkin, U. S. Consul, expressed doubts regarding the action; and when Commodore Jones found evidence that he had acted hastily he struck the American flag and raised the Mexican flag with a salute of honor. Official visits of courtesy were exchanged and friendly relations restored. The Custom House had been in American Hands for a day. ¹⁴

The year of 1846 started uneventfully with promise of peace, but very soon Governor Pico and General Castro were quarreling over customs revenue. Then early spring of 1846 found the Pacific squadron of the United States Navy consisting of the flag-ship Savannah, the Congress, Warren, Portsmouth, Cyane, Levant, the schooner Shark and the transport Erie, carrying 218 guns all told, under the command of Commodore John Drake Sloat, at Mazatlan, on the west coast of Mexico. ¹⁵

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Sloat lingered at Mazatland for several anxious weeks for confirmation of hostilities with Mexico and then on June 8, set sail for Monterey. He arrived there on July 2, 1846, ¹⁵ but finding every thing peaceful and fearing another episode as had befallen Commodore Jones he hesitated. Upon urging of his officers, at seven o'clock in the morning of Tuesday, July 7, 1846, Sloat sent Captain Mervine ashore with two or three other officers bearing formal demand for the surrender of the Post of Monterey, with all troops, arms and public property. Captain Mariano Silva replied that he had no authority to surrender the Post, whereupon, Commodore Sloat issued orders for a landing party of 250 marines and seamen, under Captain Mervine, to land and seize the Post. This party marched directly to the Custom House where they formed a square at the north end of the Custom House where the flag pole was located, and raised the American flag to the thunder of a twenty-one gun salute. ¹⁶ This action brought 600,000 square miles of territory, comprising seven present states, into the Union. The Mexican flag was not flying at the time, so it was not struck; the Presidio and Fort were only ruins. The elimination of Monterey as the principal port of California was determined within two years by the discovery of gold in the Sierras. ¹⁷

Many famous names associated with Spanish, Mexican and American regimes had been prominent in the history of the Custom House. It had served as the center of the social life of the early capitol of Alta California, and its large room had been used for many festive occasions.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

Early photographs show that at various times in its existance the roofs of the two-story elements were and were not covered with roofing tile; and at times the roof of the one-story element was also tiled and at other times covered with shingles, only. The restored version has tile on all roofs as they had at one stage or the other. The building has been restored to the configuration of the original with slight differences to conform with greater structural stability such as knee bracing and structural joints.

Exterior

Overall Dimensions:

The structure has an overall length of approximately 135 feet,

including a 9 ft. 6 in. veranda at either end, and an overall width of 34 feet, including the 9 ft. 6 in. veranda the full length of the east side. At either end the structure has a two-story element approximately square in plan with a hipped roof which extends above the one-story central element.

Foundations and Wall Construction:

There is no visual indication regarding the extent of stone or adobe brick used in the construction and historians seem to differ on this point. References are made to the original building - the north element - being all of granite. References also are made to the south element being built of chald rock, defined by California State Bureau of Mines as an indurated, siliceous shale rock (deposit of a combination of clay mud or silt, both salt and fresh water). Other references indicate that the lower five or six feet of walls are stone with adobe brick above. Stone and adobe brick were commonly used in combination at Monterey, and, as the walls are plastered, it would be impossible to determine for sure where each was used.

The building is founded over the bed rock of a surf eroded, rocky cove at the edge of the bay, and originally, before filling for the railroad track and promenade which skirts the shore line immediately east of the building, the cove extended in to the very building. The base of the walls are flared out forming stone benches at the exterior and a deep cove base at the interior floor level. The exposed surfaces were plastered and white-washed, but are restored with cement stucco. They vary in thickness from 21 inches to 27 inches. Openings have concealed timber headers and bucks, and timber plates secured to adobe walls anchor the roof construction.

Porches, Bulkheads, etc:

A 9 ft. 6 in. wide veranda extends around the north, east and south sides. At the two-story north and south elements, the veranda forms a second floor balcony at two sides. The railing at the balcony is milled to pattern and the balusters are 1-1/8 inches square set at the diagonal. Benches of rubble stone with wood plank seats extend along the veranda against the building. The railing at the veranda is a 2 by 6 inch timber let into the 8 by 8 inch chamfered posts. Veranda floor originally was wood plank, but now of concrete.

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Fireplace:

The fireplace and chimney are of red burned brick with fireplace breast of stone which was left exposed; but now is plastered with stucco.

Openings - doorways and doors:

All rooms have doors opening to the exterior veranda or balcony. The large main room has doorways, approximately 6 feet by 7 feet, 3 inches high, opening to the street and to the veranda with double doors with 6-light sash in each leaf, and hinged four-panel shutter doors on the room side.

Windows:

The windows are double hung type without parting bead as was common. Windows at ground floor have solid panelled, hinged shutters on the room side and iron bar grills on the exterior side.

Roof - shape, covering:

Roofs over the two-story elements are hipped and shed out over balconies. The elements are not quite square which creates odd transitional slopes. The roof of the one-story element sheds out over the veranda. The roof covering is tile, but during the existence of the building, the various roof elements at various times were covered with woodshingles and tile. During times of neglect the tile were most probably removed and installed on other buildings in Monterey.

The pitch of the roofs on the two-story elements is approximately 5 in 12 which flattens to approximately $2\frac{1}{2}$ in 12 over the balconies. Over the one-story element the pitch is approximately 4 in 12.

Exposed rafters support the roof overhang.

Interior

Floor plans:

The ground floor is composed of four rooms in line with inter-

connecting doorways, and each with doors to the exterior. The large main room is approximately 19 feet by 60 feet. The ground floor level of the north (original) element is two steps higher than the main room. A doorway to the east of the fireplace leads to a third room, which in turn opens to a fourth room with a floor level approximately 4 inches lower in elevation. The difference in elevations obviously was to conform to the natural grade of the terrain.

Stairways:

Utilitarian wood stairways approximately 3 feet wide lead to the second floors of the north and south elements.

Flooring:

The flooring in the large main room is 6 inch T&G fir plank and 9 inch by 9 inch tile in the north and south elements.

Walls and Ceiling Finish:

Walls throughout are stucco applied over masonry.

Ceilings on ground floor are wood plank over exposed 4 inch by 8 inch ceiling beams. At second story the wood board ceiling is applied to the underside of the rafters. The ceiling height to the underside of ceiling beams of the main room is approximately 10 feet 6 inches. At the second story the plate line is approximately 7 feet 2 inches and the ceiling splays to 10 feet 3 inches in height at center of room.

Doors:

Doors are variable in design and size, and all principal doors are job-made, laminated boards.

Trim:

The trim is of milled wood typical of imported millwork of the period. Beaded edges on trim and beams is typical.

Hardware:

Hardware, in general, is hand wrought. Doors have strap pivot hinges and thumb latches.

Site

The building is situated on the waterfront of Monterey at the foot of Alvarado Street with the veranda on the east side facing the sheltered cove in Monterey Bay. Part of the rocky cove which once extended nearly to the Custom House has been filled to accommodate the main railway extension to Pacific Grove, and more recently to provide a promenade so that the rocky cove has been obliterated under a sand fill. Stone walls of relatively recent installation enclose a landscaped area to the east and south of the building.

Excavations and research uncovered the original location of the flagpole at the north east corner of the building where the American flag was first raised on July 7, 1846; and a modern flagpole has been reinstalled in that location.

References

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10. George Tays, Old Custom House at Monterey, Mss.
11. Bancroft, History of California III, pp. 435-444
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- 15. Ibid. V, pp. 191-223
- 16. Ibid. V, pp. 224-238
- 17. George Tays, Old Custom House at Monterey, Mss.

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